

Conservative groups release survey on religious hostility

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(RNS) Two conservative groups have released a "Survey of Religious Hostility in America," which seeks to draw attention to a "relentless onslaught" against religious people and institutions.

"America today would be unrecognizable to our Founders," according to the report, unveiled on Monday (Aug. 20) by the Texas-based Liberty Institute and the Washington-based Family Research Council. The FRC's security guard was shot Wednesday by a man who was reportedly angered by the group's anti-gay stances.

"Our first freedom is facing a relentless onslaught from well-funded and aggressive groups and individuals who are using the courts, Congress, and the vast federal bureaucracy to suppress and limit religious freedom," the report says.

Most of the more than 600 cases detailed in the study occurred during the past decade, and include:

-- A federal judge threatened "incarceration" to a high school valedictorian in Castroville, Texas, unless she removed references to Jesus from her graduation speech.

-- City officials prohibited senior citizens in Balch Springs, Texas, from praying over their meals, listening to religious messages or singing gospel songs at a senior activities center.

-- A public school official in St. Louis physically lifted an elementary school student from his seat and reprimanded him in front of his classmates for praying over his lunch.

Other religious groups say the threat to religious liberty lies elsewhere, in conservative institutions such as the Liberty Institute, the FRC and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which, they say, seek to impose their religious beliefs on others.

"Conservative religious forces, who do not represent those in the pews, have access to politicians who are all too willing to bend the knee," said Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice. "We need to ensure real religious freedom, and that means that religious special interests are not allowed to dictate policy to the entire American people."

The report comes in the wake of a high-profile campaign for religious liberty by the USCCB in June and July, a "fortnight of freedom," to highlight what they perceive as attacks on the right to practice religion. The Obama administration's new mandate, which requires employers, with some exceptions, to provide contraception coverage in their health plans, particularly riled the bishops.

A poll earlier this month showed most Catholics agree with the bishops. But a March poll found that most Americans do not think religious liberty is under siege in the U.S.